

The Life and work of Victor Frankl author of MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING

(Based on Dr. Henri Abarmsen's lecture)

Victor Frankl was a holocaust survivor who founded a new school of psychotherapy which is called the Third School of psychotherapy. It was based in Vienna like all psychotherapies. Sigmund Freud being the first school. His disciple Adler being the second school and Adler's disciple Frankl being the third school. He calls this school LOGO therapy. From the Greek word LOGOS which means WORD. He basically argues that unlike many of the great thinkers of the late 19th and 20th century who expounded big monolithic theories that life is all about X. For Freud life was all about pleasure, for Nietzsche life is all about power. For Frankl life was all about meaning. His main contribution to not just the world of psychotherapy but to the world at large was the notion that humans desperately craved meaning in their lives. And they can put up with an incredible amount of suffering as long as that suffering can be translated into a system of meaning. And this was a huge insight on my own thinking as a young adult.

So let's look at Frankl's life which spans most of the 20th century. His years are 1905 to 1997 and understand a little bit about the dramatic experiences that he endured and the way he transformed them into becoming a leading world thinker. His family were middle-class, Jewish, Viennese bureaucrats working primarily in the civil services. He had a strong exposure to traditional Judaism, and he had a talent as a cantor. He was sought after as a choir member in his adolescence and as someone to lead the services because he had such a beautiful voice. He had an adolescent brush with atheism, which soured the idea of pursuing a career in religion. Religion remained very important to Frankl throughout his life. Frankl was very much a believing Jew, though he did not practice it. His second wife was a practicing Catholic. They both believed in observing both KHANAKA and Christmas. His wife later said that his husband was actually a holy man because he was such an inspirational character.

Now let's go to the actual essence of his life. He became a medical doctor specializing in neurology again under the same great influence of Sigmund Freud with whom as a young man he had a significant relationship. Freud was a mentor to him and they corresponded quite a bit. Freud encouraged him to published one of his articles so he had a direct contact with the father of psychoanalysis. He was also influenced by Freud's disciple Adler who argued against the pleasure principle but had a marked influence on the young Frankl. Frankl specialized like Freud in the intersection of mental thoughts – and their physical manifestations. In particular he was very interested in the phenomenon of Suicide. It was a lifelong occupation for him even in his student days. In as a student he organized a free counseling service for students because there was a wave of suicides in the late 1920's and 1930s which was usually associated with the awarding of grades. I experienced it myself studying the University of Toronto in the 1980's. There was a new housing project for student which was being developed. The rooms had no windows. The authorities were worried that kids would jump out of the windows to commit suicide when they were depressed. In many schools there were school breaks at the time when the suicides were at their peak. F set up a free student counseling service that reduced the suicides in Vienna to Zero. Indeed a splendid achievement. Later he made quite a career out of it. Later he became the head of the program in the hospital in which he worked, which specifically dealt with people in danger of committing suicide specially women. He served thousands of women who were depressed and likely to commit suicide. Obviously, this connected with his developing ideas of logo therapy – the notion that people desired meaning in their lives and he came to the conclusion that people can tolerate anything, any kind of

depression, any kind of terrible situation just as long as they have a reason to live, a meaning with which to frame their suffering. He served in the great hospital of Vienna – the Steinhoff Psychiatric Hospital where he headed the Suicide Pavilion – where all the mental patients likely to commit suicide were put. Thousands and thousands of women were treated by the young Frankl quite successfully.

However, we are talking of a career which was just beginning to blossom at the same time that the Western European nations and particularly Germany, Austria were moving towards nationalist socialism. For Vienna the great turning point was the time when Germany overtook Austria. This was much to the pleasure of the Austrians of that time. Germany and Austria united in 1938 which was part of the domino process which eventually led to WW-2. Hitler was following a policy of demanding certain concessions from the European nations and the allies afraid of the repeat of WW 1, with its casualties, followed the disastrous policy of appeasement. They said, OK we will let Hitler remilitarize this region, and then it will be OK. Or let him take over this part of one territory etc. They thought if Hitler got the small thing which he was upset about at that time, he would eventually stop asking. Austria was the penultimate of Hitler's demands. The last of Hitler's demands was the attack on Czechoslovakia – a mountainous region which had a lot of German people. Hitler insisted on it. Chamberlain – Prime Minister of England went there, sat with Hitler. Hitler said that after this he will not make any demands. Chamberlain returns to England waving the agreement on the tarmac saying that now Hitler has agreed and now we there will be peace because with Czechoslovakia Hitler would stop. But just after that Hitler waged a war on Poland. The famous movie associated with it is SOUND OF MUSIC. When the Austrian family realized that Austria's interests were not aligned with Germany's interests. But Austria is very enthusiastic about hitching its train on to Hitler's locomotive. So Austria become Nazified very rapidly.

The impact this happened on Frankl was quite significant. He was removed from his post at the Steinhoff Hospital, stripped of his title and was not allowed to practice as a Medical doctor. He was instead classified as a Jewish specialist and was allowed only to treat other Jews. So after leaving the Steinhoff Hospital he took a position in the Rothschild Hospital which only treated Jews and there he continued his work of counseling people – this time as the Head of the Department of Neurology. Under those very difficult circumstances he counseled hundreds of Jews undergoing stress as the persecution was increasing. The Jews of Vienna were not immediately to the concentration camps. This happened only after a few years. So they lived the early years under increasing strain. We know a few things of what F did during this brief period. He took a very strong stand against the Nazi policy of euthanasia. It was an absolutely horrific and cruel program where the Nazis would gas to death children with Down's syndrome and others with genetic and other defects. So, many people were evaluated by Dr. Frankl who insisted that they were perfectly normal, that their chromosomes were perfectly all right. This saved them from the gassing which otherwise the Nazis would have subjected these people with developmental disabilities. It is interesting to mention that some of the techniques which the Nazis experimented on were not just Jewish citizens but all other citizens. It was part of the Nazi racial ideal to try and thin herd to weed out all children who had any genetic defects, so as to purify the Aryan Race. In this context Frankl stood up and saved as many people as he could. These experiments in gassing human beings would later be applied to the Jews in the concentration camps after 1941-42. This takes us to the beginning of the holocaust per se. Just prior to his deportation to the camps he married young Jewish woman Anatoly Grosser. Their marriage was short lived because just a few months after their engagement they were deported to the concentration camps. The tragedy is still more poignant. In 1942, Frankl received a tremendously rare visa to immigrate to the USA and had this last minute opportunity to leave Vienna

behind, take his young bride and make his trip to shores of safety. Frankl was delighted with it, and he went home to speak about it with his parents. They discussed about it and then Frankl noticed a piece of marble on the table. He asked his father where that piece of marble came from. Frankl's father said that after they blew up the great synagogue he went there and found in the rubble a piece of the 10 commandments with one Hebrew letter on it. The father had brought this souvenir saddened by the destruction of the house of worship. F asked, "You were able to save one of the commandments, which one was it?" His father said that it was the commandment to honor your father and mother. Frankl was emotionally moved and he decided not to take advantage of the visa which ultimately doomed him to be deported to the camps. His father and mother were both killed in the camps as was his young bride. But that was the beginning of F's story as a log therapist. They were deported shortly after this to the camps.

Frankl spent time in four different camps. It is worth mentioning as to why there were so many different camps and what were the characteristics of these camps. Hitler had two basic different types of camps – the so called concentration camps and death camps. The concentration camps were extremely plentiful and over a hundred were scattered in various parts across Europe. They existed since the beginning of Hitler's career since 1933. One of the first things he did was setting up these concentration camps. Whereas the Death Camps were only 6 in number. These concentration camps largely had non-Jewish populations; these were people who were principally Hitler's political enemies. And as his rule went on and as the war picked up they included a lot of people whom Hitler simply didn't like such as homosexuals, gypsies, communists, beggars, disabled and this list of people grew and grew and grew. Most of the deaths in these concentration camps were because of starvation and abuse. On the contrary the Death camps were started to set up only in 1941 and they were built with the express purpose of murdering their inmates. They were not built with the idea of containment like a prison or rehabilitation, but with the express idea of destroying the people who walked through their gates. The most notorious was obviously Auschwitz, but others were Treblinka, Birkenau, Belzec, Majdanek and Dachau. Dachau is actually a bit of a hybrid camp started as a concentration camp but slowly evolved to become a death camp. What were the characteristics of the Death Camps were the Gas Chambers. The Gas Chambers are used to processing people as soon as they arrive. Following the Gas Chambers were the Crematoria which were used to get rid of the bodies which were a constant problem in these Death camps because the death rate was so high. Frankl was first sent to one of the less intense camps. This was actually considered a model camp. It was frequently opened to the Red Cross for inspection to show that the Germans were treating the Jews humanely. Frankl's father died shortly thereafter. Then they were all deported to Auschwitz where his mother died and his young wife died and his brother as well. His sister survived the war and she was the only member of the family besides F who lived. In one of the accounts his wife was forced to have an abortion in the camps and was later killed. Of the Jews who arrived at one of the 6 Death Camps, 90% were killed between the first 24 hours. There was a selection process right at the beginning when they would disembark from the trains. There would be someone who would evaluate their state of physical well being. Those who looked strong and deemed fit to do some physical work were asked to move to the right. This also included prisoners of value like identical twins (for they were very useful for medical experimentation) but everyone else was simply sent to the left. All their personal valuables were removed. The coins they may have sown in their pant linings, gold teeth, prosthetics, glasses etc. Eventually their hair was shorn which were used for various purposes. In some cases their skins were removed to make lamp shades. There are many stories of their fat being used to make soap. In the end they would be gassed and their bodies would be burnt in the crematorium. The 10% who were

chosen to be moved to the right were given various tasks necessary for the operation of the camp. There were the special commandos some Jews whose task was to remove the bodies from the gas chambers and move them to the crematoria. Some were made corporals to enforce order in the camp. Many of these camps had industries attached to them. Auschwitz had 5 satellite camps which were involved in producing things for the war effort. The camp called Buna outside Auschwitz was involved in making ACETONE a chemical useful in the manufacturing process. It occurred as an afterthought to the Germans to have this small population in every camp which was doing some useful labor. F was selected to go to the right and he was made a slave laborer. He endured months of this terrible backbreaking starvation diet as a slave laborer. Towards the end because his work as a psychological counselor began to be noticed in the camps he got assigned some easier duties in less demanding camps and sometimes getting special treatment which allowed him to survive the war. But he definitely had the experience of the worst of the camps during the terrible years between 1942-1945. He went through several camps including Auschwitz and Durkheim which was a camp near Dachau.

It was in the camps that he made his most sophisticated discoveries. It is important to point out a kind of camp inmate which is found in holocaust literature called as the MUSSALMAN. It is a strange term and translates into Muslims. However it was a term used to describe prisoners who had reached the end of their rope and they were just weeks or days away from death. These prisoners had given up, they had no more hope whatsoever and they walked around in a zombie like trance. They felt no apparent pain; no physical pain and nothing seem to bother them. They had lost the will to live in any form, get more food or any of the camp squabbles did not affect them anymore. They simply shuffled around until they finally expired out a host of illnesses and starvation they were exposed to. Many writers report about this psychological phenomenon where a person gets to such a state that he is no longer "human" as it were. The person is reduced to a shell. And Frankl reports people whispering to themselves – this man has got a week, this man will live for 10 days etc. they could be spotted right away. If they had their shoes stolen from them – which is a matter of life and death during the winter still it would not bother them and they would walk without shoes until they died of cold. It was a distinct phenomenon which we don't see in normal society because the nutrition level even for the homeless are so much better that they were in the camps. This is the phenomenon which Frankl thought quite a bit about. The term MUSSALMAN though it may sound offensive to some Muslims, it should be mentioned that the camp had a lot of euphemistic language. I mentioned how all the possessions of the Jews were taken away – their eyeglasses, false teeth, prosthetics and they were stored in a big building that was called CANADA. Such terminologies were commonly used. Let's see what Frankl observed and what he thought about the phenomenon of MUSSALMAN. He basically went through the process himself, observed it in himself. Though he never became a MUSSALMAN himself he had a tremendous insight in what was going on. He recalls how he went into the camp everything was taken away from the person.

In this context I must mention the research of the great scholar Terence Des Pres who was one of the first scholars who studied all the survivor literature and he came up with the book *THE SURVIVOR* in the early 1970s. And as soon as he finished the book he committed suicide. He was simply too overwhelmed with what he had learnt. He argued in the book that the Nazi strategy – intentional or not, conscious or not, was to infantilize the prisoners as far as possible by removing completely all their individuality and regressing them to a point of childishness. For instance, the first thing they lost was their personal belongings. F tried desperately to hang on to a manuscript, a book he was working on but it was taken away from him fairly early. He lost that book completely. Their clothes were taken away, their hair was

taken away (we take pride in our hair), they took away their names. It was against the camp rules to refer to a prisoner by his name. They had to refer to them by their numbers. To the point that Des Pres argues, that they fed them a watery gruel and gave them extremely limited latrine privileges so that they would soil themselves as much like children before they are toilet trained. He called it as the “excremental assault”. It was an attack with excrement to break the Jews down to the lowest level of their humanity, till they got to being a MUSSALMANN and then it was all over. Let me go back to the idea of the MUSSALMANN. He sees these people who have absolutely no meaning left in their lives. What happens to them? How does a person give up so much? By contrast some of the most powerful passages in his memoirs tell how certain things would inspire and excite the entire barrack. For instance, he observed the fervency of prayer. When a prayer was organized people would simply pour themselves into the prayers even in this horrible situation. Also if someone came in and said go out and see the beautiful sunset then everyone would march out to observe nature. When they were traveling between camps in trains they would take turns at admiring the mountains through the tiny little window. Only a few people could crowd around the windows at any particular time. People crowded around to get just a glimpse of nature’s beauty. Why did people who had lost so much, still appreciate these things? F also realized that his contemplation of his wife gave him tremendous strength. He didn’t know where his wife was at this point. She could have been 100-yards away or 1000-miles away. She could be alive or dead. But just thinking about his wife transported him from his horrible material circumstances and gave him tremendous strength to carry on. He thought to himself, that even if his wife was not alive anymore, thinking of her still gave him that strength. And through these kinds of experiences F began to see that it is MEANING that we all crave. Meaning helps us go through life even in the darkest of circumstances, such as the concentration camps. If one can find MEANING then one can find a way to live through it. This was a tremendous discovery.

Now let’s go to F’s creative work after the War. I have a treat – a couple of videos by F. Because F was a 20th century figure these videos exist and we can see him and hear him speak in a couple of videos. The book which cemented his work – a small little book called *MAN’S SEARCH FOR MEANING*. It was originally titled *NEVERTHELESS, I SAY YES TO LIFE*. F was encouraged to transform his memoirs into a book form. It became an exceptionally popular work. This edition was published in 2010 says that book had 12 million copies in circulation worldwide. It is an enduring classic. A Japanese newspaper recently had a vote among its readership and this book was named among the 10 best books which must survive the 20th century. Meaning thereby that this is the book we need in the future because it carries such a tremendous message of hope and significance. In the first part F describes his experiences and in the second part he describes logotherapy.

Frankl met in a cab two individuals thinking about suicide. He spoke to them separately and individually, and he asked them what was the motivation for their suicide, why were they committing suicide. Both replied that we can’t expect anything from life anymore, to which Frankl asked, “Consider this: Maybe life expects something from you. Maybe there are obligations placed on you to consider the meaning of life.”

Frankl has about 30 publications. He married a practicing Catholic which made a strange kind of a relationship, one which was quite common at that time of Europe. It was uncommon that he decided to remain in Vienna. He decided to establish himself in Vienna, where there were very few Jews left. But he thought it was right place for him to continue his work on logotherapy. Frankl was quite well versed in

the English language and was an internationally well known speaker. He was conferred 29 honorary PhDs. He was a very gifted lecturer.

Here he speaks at the University of Toronto, Canada, in the year 1972. It is generally thought that all American students wish to make a lot of money. Only 16% of the students regard as their goal in life to make a lot of money. But what is the topmost category of students want. 78% of the students were interested in finding a meaning and purpose in their lives. This would give you a holistic view of man.

At a ripe old age I started taking flying lessons. This is what my flying instructor told me. "If you are flying from East to West and you encounter a cross wind then you will not end up West but below it. So, to counter the cross wind you have to fly a little Northwards – called as CRABBING. Then only will you reach your target in the West. This is true also for Man. If we take man as he is than we make him worse. But if we over estimate him and be idealistic then we promote him to what he really can be.

So if we take man as he is, than we make him worse. But if we take man what he should be than we make him capable of being what he can be. This was said not by my flight instructor, not by me but by Goethe. That is why I said that this is the most apt MAXIM and motto for any psychotherapeutic activity. So if you do not recognize a young man's search and quest for meaning then you are making him worse, you make him dull, you make him frustrated and you add to his frustration. In every criminal, child delinquent or drug addict there must be a spark – a quest for the search for meaning. Let's recognize it. Then you will help him become what he in principle is capable of becoming.

Frankl was a very gifted speaker and a writer as well. His ideas are really quite engaging. Here is a small extract from his book MANS SEARCH FOR MEANING.

I had none of this in mind when I wrote the book in 1945. And I did so within nine successive days and with the firm determination that the book should be published anonymously. In fact, the first printing of the original German version does not show my name on the cover, though at the last moment, just before the book's initial publication, I did finally give in to my friends who had urged me to let it be published with my name at least on the title page. At first, however, it had been written with the absolute conviction that, as an anonymous opus, it could never earn its author literary fame. I had wanted simply to convey to the reader by way of a concrete example that life holds a potential meaning under any conditions, even the most miserable ones. And I thought that if the point were demonstrated in a situation as extreme as that in a concentration camp, my book might gain a hearing. I therefore felt responsible for writing down what I had gone through, for I thought it might be helpful to people who are prone to despair.

"And so it is both strange and remarkable to me that— among some dozens of books I have authored— precisely this one, which I had intended to be published anonymously so that it could never build up any reputation on the part of the author, did become a success. Again and again I therefore admonish my students both in Europe and in America: "Don't aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it. I want you to listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge. Then you will

live to see that in the long run—in the long run, I say!—success will follow you precisely because you had forgotten to think of it."